



ATHENA
NextGen

Thought
Leadership
Series

Celebrate ATHENA's History and What's Yet To Come: A Q&A with our Founders

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As Women's History Month comes to a close, I couldn't help but think about the history of ATHENA Orlando Women's Leadership, Inc. and the incredible impact the organization has had in Central Florida. Like many of you, I went through the NextGen program not knowing just how much it would change my view of my career and myself, and how my involvement today continues to contribute to my professional and personal life.

Recently, I caught up with our Founders Karen Keene, Jennifer Johnson and Traci Smith to reflect on the organization's origins, how it has grown and what they hope to see for the future. Also, how ATHENA continues to raise up the next set of leaders through the endowment at the UCF College of Business.

Q: How do you three know each other?

JEN: *"We were professional acquaintances who came together with a vision for a formal women's mentorship program in Central Florida. We were passionate about the ATHENA Leadership Model and pulled from our network of established women and community leaders to raise awareness of our mission. We knew that ATHENA NextGen had great potential to be a dynamic and one-of-kind program for rising leaders."*

Q: How did you first learn about ATHENA International?



KAREN: *"I have always believed that leadership involves focusing our attention on a need that speaks to our heart, taps into our passion, makes the most of our abilities and enables us to inspire others. If we're fortunate enough to find that need in our lifetime, then we instantly know it's the true purpose that allows us to make a difference in the world. For me, I've found my purpose with ATHENA."*

My journey with ATHENA began in 2005 when we first introduced ATHENAPowerLink to Orlando and Jacksonville. I was working with the national law firm, Foley & Lardner, at the time. The attorneys wanted to make an impact by investing in female entrepreneurs at the second and third stages of growth and profitability.

Every woman business owner that is selected for the ATHENAPowerLink program receives her own panel of advisors tailored to her business for one year. The panels are composed of experts in the business community including lawyers, accountants, bankers, marketing executives, public relations advisors, human resources managers, and insurance agents.

More than 70 entrepreneurs have graduated from the PowerLink program in Orlando. Their companies are thriving and they're creating jobs."

Q: Why did you decide to start the ATHENA NextGen program in Orlando?

KAREN: *“ATHENA Orlando Women’s Leadership, Inc. evolved from the vision of three women who came together and dared to dream. I teamed up with Jennifer Johnson and Traci Smith in 2012. We were passionate about developing programs for the next generation of women leaders.*

Studies show that millennials will make up the majority of the workforce in 2025. Yet, there were no formal programs in Orlando that bridged the gap between established women leaders and their younger emerging leader counterparts. Basically, we identified a need in our community that wasn’t being served.”

Q: Can you tell me about the first NextGen class?

KAREN: *“We launched the first ATHENA NextGen class in 2014 for professional women across a wide range of industries. Just as it is today, it was designed to help them realize their full leadership potential.”*

Q: We have had incredible presentations at the programs. How do you select the speakers?

KAREN: *“Prominent business leaders jump at the chance to facilitate the sessions. Over the years, our esteemed faculty has included Sandy Hostetter, Annetta Wilson, Maryann Barry, Congresswoman Val Demings, Shelley Lauten, Diana Bolivar, Carolyn Fennell, Maritza Martinez, Elisha Gonzalez, Diane Sears, Christi Ashby, and Kate Slentz as well as Chief Judge Lisa Munyon, Judge Leticia Marques, Judge Tanya Davis Wilson, and Judge Elizabeth Gibson.”*

Q: Why do you feel a program like NextGen is needed for our community?



TRACI: *“Local companies are seeing the success of ATHENA Orlando Women’s Leadership, Inc. and our NextGen graduates. Cogent Bank, a local state-chartered bank, has 5 bankers who are ATHENA alumnae. Cogent Bank supports women in leadership and the skills and resources that ATHENA alumnae bring to the workplace is extremely valuable. We have a special bond and connection after being a part of ATHENA. We come together to support each other and new emerging women leaders joining our team. That is what ATHENA is all about and I get to see it every day in action.*

As a manager, I struggle with offering different ways to help my employees with personal development. ATHENA NextGen offers a program that not only helps an emerging leader with referral resources and soft sales skills but, more importantly, personal development.

The more we learn about ourselves, the better employee we will be. It is a gift to be able to offer the NextGen program to an employee knowing internal resources may not be available.

Q: Why is it so important for women to learn the principles that ATHENA supports?



JEN: *“The ATHENA Leadership Model was developed to inspire women to reach their full potential and strives to create balance in leadership worldwide. ATHENA NextGen was designed around the ATHENA Leadership Model and gives participants an opportunity to learn from established women leaders who have made significant contributions in their profession and community.*

It has been inspiring to watch the professional achievements of our alumnae. As founders, it was our vision to create pathways for emerging women leaders to advance professionally, civically, and politically. We knew a program like ATHENA NextGen would create a strong pipeline of female leaders in Central Florida for years to come.”

KAREN: *“NextGen alumnae describe the experience as life changing. It builds their confidence, connections, and collaboration in the workplace. They know their value and aren’t afraid to ask for what they want during salary negotiations.*

The majority of the women who participate in the NextGen program get promoted within their companies or start their own businesses. They serve on boards of directors for numerous professional associations, non-profit organizations, and educational institutions. In addition, we intentionally built the ATHENA board of directors by electing alumnae to serve in roles that are closely aligned to their interests and skill sets.”

Q: Did you ever imagine the program would grow to nearly 400 alumnae?

KAREN: *“When we first launched the program in 2014, I remember saying, ‘Just imagine the impact this program will have in Central Florida in a decade when more than 500 women have graduated.’ I believed in my heart it was possible. Back then it was a dream. Today, it’s fast becoming a reality.*

Now in its 9th year, nearly 400 women have completed the program and they’re smashing the proverbial glass ceilings. They feel empowered to level up.

ATHENA Orlando alumnae are the next generation of leaders. They’re rapidly advancing in their careers, serving on community boards, and blazing the trail for other female entrepreneurs. The difference is that hundreds of these women possess a common bond through their participation in ATHENA NextGen. That’s the true definition of a movement. Look at where we are today. We’re unbelievably close to reaching that goal.”

JEN: *“Our determination for developing the NextGen program was fueled by future potential. Karen had great vision for how this program would create a movement in our community and the impact it has had would not be possible without our dedicated board and volunteers who carry that vision forward.”*

Q: Why did you decide to create the endowment at the UCF College of Business?

KAREN: *“One of the women who was instrumental in helping us to establish ATHENA Orlando Women’s Leadership, Inc. was Helen Donegan. When we presented our ideas for the leadership luncheon and NextGen program to Helen, she believed in us. She provided support, guidance, and connections that were invaluable. We knew we wanted to make an indelible mark for future generations. Another opportunity to do that was to expand our relationship with the University of Central Florida. We worked closely with Helen, Tiffany Hughes, and the UCF Foundation to establish the first endowment for female graduate students. A percentage of the proceeds we receive from class participants’ registration fees are contributed every year toward the endowment. To date, we have donated more than \$130,000 to benefit UCF students.”*